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Interpretation and translation issues referred to in section III, paragraphs 13 to 15, of General Assembly resolution 52/220, cost-accounting system for conference services and access to the optical disk system

Report of the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions

1. The Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions has considered the reports of the Secretary-General on interpretation and translation issues referred to in section III, paragraphs 13 to 15, of General Assembly resolution 52/220 (A/53/221), a cost-accounting system for conference services (A/52/1000 and A/53/257) and access to the optical disk system (A/52/803). During its consideration of the reports, the Advisory Committee met with representatives of the Secretary-General, who provided additional information.

Interpretation and translation issues referred to in section III, paragraphs 13 to 15, of General Assembly resolution 52/220

2. Paragraphs 2-9 of the report of the Secretary-General (A/53/221) indicate that 30 posts were abolished in the context of the programme budget for 1998-1999. This brought to 86 the total number of posts abolished in the biennium 1996–1997 and 1998–1999. Those abolished for 1998–1999 occurred mostly in document processing and support functions, reflecting investment in technological innovations. A total of 17 interpreter posts have been abolished (three P-2s in New York, six P-2s and three 3 P-3s in Geneva and five P-3s in Vienna), as well as 13 translator posts (two P-2s in New York, four P-3s in Geneva and seven P-3s in Vienna). The Advisory Committee was informed that the P-2 level reductions in New York simply addressed an anomaly, since interpreters are recruited at the P-3 level, and translators recruited at the P-2 level are promoted after two years of satisfactory service. Furthermore, as indicated in paragraphs 6 and 7 of the report and after an analysis of needs, the reductions in Geneva were carried out to achieve proportionality of posts among languages, and those in Vienna took into account a reduction in the workload of the United Nations Industrial Development Organization as well as the number of vacancies, some of which had existed since 1986.

3. The Advisory Committee notes, as indicated in paragraph 9 of the report, that interpretation and translation capacity was being strengthened during 1998–1999, since the posts that had remained vacant during 1996–1997 to implement mandated vacancy rates, including six new translation posts in New York, have been filled. The Committee was briefed on some of the technological

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innovations introduced in the field of translation, and notes that remote translation has become standard for all meetings held away from Headquarters, computer-assisted translations are being tested, and 50 per cent of translated texts are typed directly into the computer instead of being dictated then transcribed.

4. Paragraphs 10-16 of the report address the issue of self-revision. The Advisory Committee notes that the percentage rate of self-revision, recommended at 45 per cent by the Committee in 1980, to ensure a high quality of texts, still remains valid. As indicated therein, the average rate at Headquarters, during the period from April 1997 to March 1998, was 47.8 per cent, while at Geneva and Vienna they were 61.8 and 64.4 per cent respectively, with higher rates during peak workload periods. The Committee also notes that a number of measures have been or are being implemented, such as a revision of job descriptions, training of staff, peer review and spot checks, among others. The Committee welcomes and encourages these and other measures that may be taken to ensure a high quality of translation.

5. Furthermore, the Advisory Committee is of the view that the Secretary-General should prepare a special report analysing such problems as may exist related to career development in language services. The report should take into account that the numbers and grade levels of staff should be commensurate with the needs of the Organization as well as the fact that requirements differ between languages as well as between duty stations.

Cost-accounting for system for conference services

6. The Committee notes that the report of the Secretary-General dated 14 August 1998 (A/53/257) reproduces and expands the background information contained in the previous report, dated 31 July 1998 (A/52/1000). The report is presented in accordance with the request made by the General Assembly in section D of its resolution 52/214 of 22 December 1997 to expedite the development of a cost-accounting system for conference services in 1998.

7. The objectives and benefits of such a system are touched upon in paragraphs 21-24 of the report of the Secretary-General dated 14 August. It is indicated therein that such a system would produce estimates for the costs of specific conference service outputs. It would thus help to determine the actual costs of services provided on a reimbursable basis, as well as the costs or savings resulting from the addition or deletion of a certain volume of services after approval of the budget and the costs of providing services at different locations.

8. The Secretary-General proposes a prototype approach to developing the cost-accounting system, in which a working model would be developed in four steps, which are summarized in paragraphs 27-29 of the report. A development team would be required to implement the prototype, including staff with database and costing skills and knowledge of conference services or United Nations budgeting and accounting procedures. Paragraph 32 of the report indicates that the prototype could be limited to one duty station.

9. The cost of the prototype is estimated at $305,000 for a six-month time-frame (see para. 36). Moreover, after the initial three-month period, a progress review would be conducted to evaluate the feasibility of the system. The Committee notes that this proposal is a first step and that it therefore does not address requirements for improving the existing information systems (the Document Records, Information and Trading System and the Integrated Management Information System), which, as indicated in paragraph 17 of the report, "need extensive modification to support a meaningful cost-accounting system". In paragraph 39, the report indicates that to proceed further "it will be necessary to identify staff with the required knowledge of United Nations budgeting and accounting practices and conference-servicing activities to work in this field" and that "none of the permanent staff members with the requisite qualifications in the Office of Programme Planning, Budget and Accounts or in the Department of General Assembly Affairs and Conference Services can be redeployed from their current duties for this purpose at this time".

10. While the Advisory Committee supports the principle of cost accounting as a management tool, in view of the above, it is of the opinion that the report of the Secretary-General (A/53/257) does not provide sufficient information at this point to allow the Committee to recommend the endorsement of the full-fledged development of a cost-accounting system. Moreover, the Committee believes that the purpose and scope of the system needs to be more clearly defined, a clearer presentation of related costs is required, and a cost-benefit analysis must be carried out in order to prevent the development of an elaborate system the costs of which may end up outweighing the benefits. In the past, the Committee has cautioned against expensive cost-accounting systems. The Committee recommends that the Secretary-General, in the light of experience with the prototype, address the weaknesses outlined above, refine his proposals and resubmit them at the earliest opportunity, taking into

account such additional policy guidance as the General Assembly may wish to give at this time.

Access to the optical disk

11. The report of the Secretary-General (A/52/803) was submitted in accordance with the request contained in General Assembly resolution 51/211 F of 15 September 1997 and addresses issues raised by the Advisory Committee in its first report on the proposed programme budget for the biennium 1998–1999 (A/52/7, chap. II, part VIII, paras. VIII.110-VIII.113), such as the exploration of the possibility of generating income through the sale of access to United Nations databases.

12. The Advisory Committee notes that in addition to the free-of-charge connection, via the Internet, of all permanent and observer missions, requests have been received by the Organization for access to the system from a number of intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations. The Secretary-General indicates, in paragraph 7 of his report, that a sustained addition of users would require additional investment in order to expand the functional and operational capacity of the system. The Committee was further informed that this expansion would also limit the possibility of congestion and slowdown of a system that is already seven years old. Providing access on a fee-paying basis should help to provide funds for the expansion of the capacity of the system while "maintaining the quality of service and the priority given by the General Assembly to the users mentioned in paragraph 1 of resolution 51/211 F".

13. Paragraph 8 of the report provides a list of the additional users and proposed discounts to be offered to fee-paying users. The Advisory Committee was informed, upon enquiry, that a full-price subscription to the optical disk system (ODS) is $2,500 per annum. The rules and guidelines governing such sales as well as the reporting of income generated are recalled in paragraphs 9 and 10 of the report. The Committee has no objection to the proposal. It recommends, however, that a way be found to apply income generated through ODS subscriptions directly to help meet the cost of ODS maintenance and/or expansion. The Committee trusts that quality and priority of service to Member States will be maintained. The Committee is also of the view that a system to monitor satisfaction with ODS should be put in place.